



Passing the Torch

By Jim Hamm

Growing up, my people were primarily fishermen. I well remember floating the Brazos River below Possum Kingdom, catching flounder and stingrays in the Laguna Madre, casting plastic worms into the stumps and snags of Toledo Bend, and catching bass and perch in stock tanks across a fair swathe of Texas.

I enjoy fishing to this day, but it was the occasional hunting trips as a kid that I remember best. The grandest trip of all was an elk hunt, in 1964, taken when I was 12 years old in the mountains of New Mexico. Dad had been invited to a hunting camp in Vermejo Park, and let me play hookie from 7th grade for a week so I could go along.

We hunted mostly on horseback in the wild, beautiful country, which to me was way better than any trip to Disneyland.

There was an eclectic group of hunters in the camp, but one in particular stood out. We'll call him Butch, since that wasn't his name. He was somewhat overweight to do much riding, and spent most of his time driving the rough roads in a jeep. One day dad and I went along just to see some more of the country. We happened across a group of mule deer, and Butch let loose a volley from the jeep.

One buck fell, and we drove right up to him. He was clearly still alive, and dad said, "Better shoot him again."

But Butch would have none of it, setting his rifle aside and drawing his knife, "I'll show you how to do it." He marched up to the buck, straddled him, and grabbed an antler while reaching to cut his throat.

Whereupon the buck stood up. I will only say that there is no digni-

fied way to dismount a thrashing, wounded buck, but amidst much screaming and strong language, the deer eventually shook free and ran. I shot the buck dead in mid-stride.

"Nice shot," said Dad in a loud stage whisper, "but you shot the wrong one."

I was just a kid, but knew better than to laugh...

Anyway, the entire trip was an adventure, culminating in a day-long ride up the mountain with another hunter familiar with the ranch. Just before sunset, we heard elk bugling, tied up the horses, and crept forward through the timber to the edge of an open park.

There in front of us were two dozen elk, several bulls among them. I held my breath while dad waited for the biggest one to turn broadside. He finally dropped the bull with one shot from his lever-action .308. By the time we field dressed him, the sun was down and the low clouds were starting to spit snow. I'll never forget the ride down the mountain in the dark, snowflakes whirling and fingers tucked under the front of the saddle blanket against the cold, elk bugles echoing.

That hunt plucked a chord in me which vibrates still.

In 1992, I was fortunate enough to buy a ranch in Mills County, and my two young sons spent summers and weekends here hunting, fishing, working, and growing up.

Lee, my oldest son, has from an early age been a fine shot with a longbow. In fact, when fifteen years old, he won the youth division at the Texas State Longbow Championship. That fall he had matched wits with whitetailed deer, but never had an opportunity to launch an arrow with predatory intent.

A year later, when Lee was sixteen,



one evening I put him into a liveoak tree, a stand we called Old Reliable for the well-travelled deer trail that meandered past just downwind.

After driving to pick him up after dark, I watched him climb down from his tree in the headlights and walk toward me, wide-eyed.

"Well?" I prompted.

"I hit one," he said simply, fingering his longbow.

"Tell it from the start."

He explained in a shaky voice that a doe and a yearling had approached his stand just before dark. The doe passed at the limits of his range, so he waited, motionless, until the yearling was in his shooting lane at fifteen yards. He picked a spot and released, and thought the arrow zipped right into the kill zone, angling down and forward. The deer bolted into the brush but the sound

of its running ended abruptly after a few seconds. Unsure exactly what had transpired, Lee stayed quietly in his tree and waited.

"You did good," I assured him.

Flashlights in hand, we found a couple of drops of blood where the deer had been standing. The blood trail increased as we followed, until our small lights finally picked out the deer, dead less than seventy yards from Lee's tree.

"Alright!" he said, as we darted to the deer.

I grabbed his hand and shook it.

"Alright," he said again, his smile spreading.

He had called his shot correctly on the yearling doe, right in the engine room, a clean, quick kill. Kneeling, he placed a hand on the deer,

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